

THE BERLIN WALL AS A HETEROTOPIAN SITE.
REFLECTIONS ON THE TOPOLOGY OF THE WALL AS A TOURIST
LANDMARK

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Abstract. The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas visited Berlin in the summer of 1971. Since then, he famously proclaimed that his encounter with the Berlin Wall at that time was his very first psychological confrontation with the powerful side of architecture. The Berlin Wall seemed to invert all of his expectations and perceptions of reality (Boyer 2008, 65). This powerful encounter made him affirm a well-known maxim: “Where there is nothing, everything is possible; where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible” (Boyer 2008, 65, Koolhaas 1995).

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The Berlin Wall was taken down on November 9, 1989, when the border between East and West Berlin was reopened and the wall itself was finally dismantled. The Wall was erected during the Cold War, following the so-called Berlin Crisis. It began to escalate when, on November 10, 1958, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev delivered a speech in which he demanded that the Western powers of the United States, Great Britain and France pull their forces out of West Berlin within six months. This ultimatum sparked a three-year crisis over the future of the city and culminated, in 1961, with the building of the Wall.

In 2014, when celebrating the 25th anniversary of taking it down, the city inaugurated the *Lichtgrenze*, a light installation in remembrance of the route of the original Wall. Many exhibits of its history were also installed in central Berlin. According to *Der Spiegel*,

at least 136 people died in attempts to surmount the Wall. They were either shot by border guards, ripped to shreds by landmines or they drowned in the Spree River (Wiegrefe 2009).

At the beginning of the 21st century, for the first time, more than half of all humans live in urban regions. This situation calls for an in-depth analysis of the different aspects of urban space and architecture. Recently, interest in different theoretical approaches towards the aesthetics and philosophy of space has been on the rise. Perhaps it is in relation to this situation and the renaissance of these issues that we should also acknowledge the value of the maxim of Koolhaas, as well as his encounter with the Berlin Wall. If the maxim of Koolhaas is applicable to all architecture, what are the consequences of this notion?

I think this phrase is strongly echoing the ethos of Michel Foucault's lecture "Of Other Spaces" ("*Des Espaces Autres*"), which he held for French students of architecture on March 14, 1967. It was Ionel Schein who had asked for Foucault to give a brief talk on his philosophy of space for the students, after hearing Foucault's radio program of 7th December 1966, illustrating briefly the concept of "heterotopias" (Dehaene & De Cauter 2008, 13). Foucault had written the lecture during his stay in Sidi-Bou-Saïd, Tunisia, where he had fled from France to escape the commotion stirred by the publication of "*Les Mots et Les Choses*", in 1966 (Dehaene & De Cauter 2008, 13).

Foucault's fragmentary reflections on heterotopias present an interesting approach and provide multiple points of departure for the analysis of architecture and space. They remained unknown to most until his death because he authorized the publication of the essay "Of Other Spaces" only shortly before that. In an interview, Foucault was asked whether space was central to the analysis of power, and he answered:

Yes. Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power. To make a parenthetical remark, I recall being invited, in 1966, by a group of architects to do a study of space, of something that I called at that time 'heterotopias', those singular spaces to be found in

some given social spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others. (Soja 1989, 19)

Foucault discussed the heterotopias first in a radio program entitled “*Les Hétérotopies*”, in winter 1966. In this talk, Foucault begins by describing spaces that are, essentially, utopian by nature, such as the attic or the garden in children’s play (Boyer 2008, 53). In another radio broadcast entitled “*Le Corps Utopique*”, in winter 1966, he goes on to discuss similar spaces that adults define among themselves (Boyer 2008, 53). According to Foucault, this kind of spaces are heterotopian, as they have a double function – they make the surrounding space normal and keep it normal whilst they are operating on the area of “the imaginary” (Boyer 2008, 54). As he concludes, the most essential aspect of this kind of spaces is that they are contestations of all other spaces – they are real, existent spaces that, in fact, show reality to be illusory by nature (Boyer 2008, 54).

Foucault has adopted the term heterotopia from medical terminology. In that context, a heterotopia means a kind of tissue appearing in an abnormal place, when it does not affect the functions of an organism (11 Sohn 2008, 41-42). For Foucault, heterotopias are, essentially, “effectively realized utopias in which the real emplacements are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted”.

In the second radio program dealing with heterotopias, Foucault discusses the motivations behind creating such spaces, and concludes that, perhaps, this is because we need to “escape” to a “non-place” outside of all places, where we can dream of “a bodiless body”. Here, he references Proust, who every morning woke up to face the reality that he cannot escape his body; it will always be there (Boyer 2008, 54-55.).

Whereas Koolhaas famously proclaimed that “emptiness of the metropolis is not empty”, in *Imagining Nothingness* Foucault wished to point out that we live inside “a set of relations” not in “a void” (Boyer 2008, 65, Foucault 2008/1967, 16). For Foucault, there is no

universal form of a heterotopian space, even though heterotopias, according to him, are present in every culture. However, he does mention a heterotopia *par excellence*, that is, the ship.

The ship, Foucault says “is given over to the infinity of the sea”, “a floating piece of space”, “a place without a place that exists by itself, that is self-enclosed” (Foucault 2008/1967, 22). He concludes the lecture “Of Other Spaces” with the remark that “In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage replaces adventure, and the police the pirates”. This is a direct reference to the totalitarian society, where no dreams may flourish.

As Hilde Heynen noted, the “built environment accommodates and frames social transformations” and, as such, “it is both active and passive” (Heynen 2008, 314-315). This is also the way Foucault views the formation of the subject in relation to space.

Koolhaas had enrolled in the School of Architecture in London, 1968, where he presented a thesis titled “The Berlin Wall as Architecture”. He was acutely aware that architects, in the words of M. Christine Boyer, “bathed in an illusion of imagery and tyrannical mystification that appeared to be more real than lived-in reality”, and that “it was necessary to redeem architecture from this torture of realism” (Boyer 2008, 69). The importance of re-imagining and re-interpreting present-day reality is also highlighted in Foucault’s concluding remark.

Echoing Foucault’s wish, I suggest we need “heterotopology” (“*hétérotopologie*”) in order to reveal certain aspects of space, place and various sites; especially so, when we are dealing with any hegemonic discourse. I suggest we need to consider a heterotopia as a site with potential for either supporting this discourse, or as a site with potential for a different, resistant and subversive discourse, or in certain cases, both.

According to Heynen, whereas various heterotopias – and here Foucault might mention the houses for the elderly, the prison, or the mental hospital – can certainly be “sites of hegemonic violence and oppression”, they may also “harbour the potentials for

resistance and subversion”. I propose that the historic Berlin Wall, essentially, was a site of both these binary opposites.

I propose that instead of that we need a new maxim, instead of the original by Koolhaas “where there is nothing, everything is possible”, where there is architecture, *heterotopian resistance and subversion are possible, at any given site of hegemonic violence and oppression*. In conjunction with this remark, I suggest recognising the concept of a heterotopian space as deeply ambivalent in nature.

Finally, I suggest that illegal, uncommissioned street art is a form of such transgressive, resistant discourse, and may create a heterotopian space or a heterotopian site, that is potentially subversive. The Berlin Wall was decorated with street art during the 1980s, and I think here it is evident that these images made this site a landmark of a heterotopian nature on the Western side even before the Wall was taken down.

Reflecting on the Wall, I suggest that illegal street art is generating a heterotopian space because it usually appears in an urban, public space contesting and interrogating the *genus loci* of the space in question. Simultaneously, street art also builds upon and reflects upon its surroundings, much like the mirror, which, according to Foucault, is yet another example of a heterotopia (Foucault 2008/1967, 17).

According to Foucault “the mirror functions as a heterotopia in the respect that it renders this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the looking glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal”. In Foucault’s view, heterotopias are capable of juxtaposing several spatial elements (Foucault 2008/1967, 19). Here, I think street art certainly functions in a heterotopian way.

For Foucault, the heterotopian spaces always have a critical function in relation to the rest of the space (Foucault 2008/1967, 21). I think illegal street art is heterotopian, as it attempts to create a space for art in the middle of the city, and so it has a critical function in relation to the rest of the space, often defined by the

lack of street art. Illegal street art potentially creates, in my opinion, a space for an aesthetic experience resisting the hegemony.

Now, a bit over a fourth of a century has passed since dismantling the Berlin Wall, significant parts of it still remain in place in the form of the *Mauerpark*, the *East Side Gallery* and several other sites. The topology of the original Wall as a heterotopian site of totalitarian terror and death has since been transformed into the topology of a remarkable tourist landmark in Berlin.

Reflecting more on the potential of street art in contesting the discourse of the hegemony in public space is beyond the scope of this presentation. However, I believe street art is needed to create a more diverse discourse in public space. Also, I believe that legal or commissioned street art, or street art presented in a gallery or a museum space, may not be able to generate a heterotopia as such.

In Foucault's view, whereas the 19th century seemed to be preoccupied with history and time, the 20th century, for him, seemed more concerned with space. Whereas Edward Soja, for example, has described Foucault's account of the heterotopia as "frustratingly incomplete, inconsistent" and "incoherent" (Soja 1996, 162) I think reflecting on the case of the Berlin Wall as well as other heterotopias may shed some light on this topic.

Foucault never returned to the subject, although he, in Soja's words, "persistently explored what he called 'the fatal intersection of time with space' from the first to the last of his writings" (Soja 1989, 19). Foucault's heterotopia is more of a demonstrative than a declarative concept, but should not be overlooked for that very reason. The flexibility of the notion of the heterotopia makes it, in my opinion, a very viable theoretical apparatus.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the geopolitical changes not only the "end of history" but also the "end of the utopian age" was announced. However, I think it is still worthwhile to critically reconsider the relevance of the notion of *heterotopia* in relation to architecture and space as well as street art. I conclude with this remark by Foucault: "Critique doesn't have to be the premise of a

deduction that concludes, ‘this then is what needs to be done’. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is” (Foucault 2000, 236).

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